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ABSTRACT

This brief paper discusses needs of school-age children and factors to consider in providing school-age child care. These needs and factors are explored in a discussion of five myths about school-age day care. The myths are as follows: (1) school-age children are old enough to fend for themselves, assume responsibility for their own welfare and arrange their own leisure time activities; (2) almost anyone, if friendly, can develop and carry out a good child care program for school-age children; (3) most communities have accepted the responsibility for planning, organizing, coordinating and implementing school-age child care services; (4) there is not enough money to support high quality school-age care; and (5) parents who need day care programs are not concerned about or interested in the quality of care their children receive. Anecdotal examples of children's comments are used to illustrate the need for child care providers to respect children as persons in their own right, to realise that no two children are alike, and to keep a sense of humor. (Author/SS)

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Children First: A Look at the Needs of School-Age Children

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There is no denying that the need for school-age child care is a social problem. More mothers enter the labor market each year. (In California, for example, it is predicted that by 1984 the number of children under fourteen years of age whose mothers work will increase by 215,000.)[1] As a consequence, an increasing number of school-age children from varied ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds need high quality day care which does not exist in sufficient quantity in many communities. For too many school-age children there is "no place to play, nothing to do, and nowhere to go before school and after school closes."[2]

Five Myths About School-Age Care

Despite this obvious need for day care services during the time parents are away at work and children are not in school, too many people are willing to assume that school-age children do not need child care programs because they are old enough to fend for themselves, assume responsibility for their own welfare and arrange their own leisure time activities. For children from five to twelve years of age, this assumption is a myth.

In relation to that myth, it has seemed easier for the public to accept the need for child care services for children under five years of age than for childen five and over. One often hears, "I didn't need experts to take care of me; I grew up without child care" or "I grew up without a lot of supervision and I turned out O.K." But school-age children do need adult supervision and guidance. They cannot be expected to be totally responsible for their health and well being, to be self sufficient in environments that offer no opportunity for positive growth and development; to make constructive, satisfying use of their before and after school hours.

A second myth is that almost anyone, if friendly, warm and breathing, can develop and carry out a good program that meets the unique, complex, individual and group day care needs of school-age children. Of course, school-age children in family day care, group, or center care need friendly, caring people supervising and guiding them, but they also need to be with adults who have knowledge and understanding of how children

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grow and develop -- adults who can facilitate children's activities, encourage individuality and stimulate ideas. Children need people who are interested in, and feel responsible for, seeing that their day-by-day experiences take place in an environment which promotes growth and learning.

A third myth is that most communities have accepted the responsibility for planning, organizing, coordinating and implementing school-age child care services. Certainly each community has the responsibility for assessing the particular needs of its children and tailoring staff and activities to meet these needs. As children begin to move away from the home base into the community, they develop more self-reliance and competence to make choices and test their ability to manage themselves; at this point, coordination within the community of agencies, organizations, institutions, and day care providers becomes increasingly necessary. Through coordination of many activities provided for older children, community agencies extend the services of the day care program.

The contention that there is not enough money to support high quality school-age care provides the basis of the fourth myth. Helen Heffernan, formerly Chief of the California Division of Elementary Education, used to say that "what we value we will pay for." The fact that money is not made available merely indicates that day care for school-age children is not high on the priority list.

Finally, it is a myth that parents who need day care programs are not concerned about or interested in the quality of care their children receive. Parents are interested and concerned. In fact, many of them are desperate because care is not available. Good day care programs are extensions, not substitutes, for children's homes. Children need to feel that their parents are an accepted and an integral part of the day care family. Children cannot be separated from their parents and expected to follow two different paths. There must be a blending of home, school and day care.

Like all other human beings, school-age children have basic needs: to be nourished, clothed and sheltered and to be loved, valued, and accepted as important.

Children need to be respected for the people they are, not because they are good or bad, outgoing or shy, affectionate or cold, but because they are persons in their own right. It hurts to be ignored, rejected, ridiculed, isolated or disciplined unjustly. It feels good to belong, to be listened to, to be included, to be understood, to be praised when praise is due. I remember an eighth-grade student who participated in one of our child development centers. She was too heavy, had a poor complexion, and did not relate well to children or adults. It wasn't until she established a relationship with a four-year-old who was pleased to see her arrive and sorry to see her leave that she began to enjoy being a participant. The turning point was the day I overheard the four-year-old, who was sitting on the student's lap, say as she softly patted the student's cheek, "I don't like how you look, but I like how you be!"

Like all other human beings, school-age children need security, freedom, structure and challenge in their lives. These considerations should form an integral part of any day care program. In terms of security children need to know that someone is in charge of things, that there is a dependable base from which to operate, whether in the home, in a family day care home or in a center. Freedom requires that children are able to move forward, to acquire and develop new skills, and "to satisfy curiosity, use equipment for exploring, probing and manipulating in every possible way." Freedom, however, does not mean that children can run riot. Structure is necessary to ensure that children know the limits within which they can explore their freedom. For example, the school-age child's relationships with authority may be altered because the child is in a new situation which may have values different from those experienced in the home. In this situation the child needs to know what is expected and permitted. Essentially, structure necessitates limits which are clearly and firmly defined and yet which offer a certain amount of flexibility to meet the needs of a particular child. Finally, challenge provides school-age children with the opportunity to experience and to expand their horizons. However, it should be realized that in meeting challenges children set themselves (or have set for them) goals which are attainable.

Another factor to consider in the provision of school-age day care is that no two children are alike. As Mister Rogers writes in The Purple Adventures of Lady Elaine Fairchilde, "We all have similarities and differences just as sea shells or grains of sand are different" and "People differ in different ways: size, age, appearance ability to see or hear." Although there is no typical school-age child, there are certain characteristics that seem to stand out for different ages. It is important to know what these differences are if we are to be responsible for planning and implementing programs that meet school-age children's day care needs.

It helps to know, for instance, why five-year-olds in general need more supervision and guidance than ten-year-olds. Five-year-olds stay nearer to home base; they have problems with sharing and losing; they wiggle when sitting and get into all kinds of body positions and screw up their faces when drawing or writing; they are active, busy and vigorous; they know the difference between right and wrong, are easily embarassed yet can handle most routine situations; they use adult gestures, mannerisms, postures, affectations and intonations; and they act out what they know of the adult world and change roles rapidly to meet the demand.

Ten- and eleven-year-olds, on the other hand, are more sophisticated, but they are also more moody. They tease, test, talk back, are more rebellious, and yet are open to distraction. At one center, the children have a chant: "Don't blame me, don't blame me, I did it 'cause he told me so, so don't blame me." They sing it, dance to it, act it out and laugh when one child admits, "O.K. I did it." They are involved with team sports and competition, with cooking, billiards, puppet shows, records (jazz, rock and roll), joke books, projects, clubs, rituals, riddles and rhymes (like "Inka Bink, a bottle of ink, the cork fell out and wow you stink"). They keep journals, write plays, are interested in making money, and like to move beyond the home base to the community. They want to have the freedom to make choices about what to do and where to

go. They are gaining in height and weight. Girls may be menstruating and may be concerned about their looks, especially their skin and hair. Peer relationships are all important. Usually, they are not neat about clothes or rooms.

Planners of day care programs must take these differences between age groups into consideration. I have seen many programs in which children who have been in a center for five or six years are still being fed the same daily schedule that long since has been outgrown -- a pabulum, patty-cake program, boring and inviting trouble. However, an activity that is handled well by the staff can be appropriate for children of different ages.

When a volunteer brought crayfish to one of the centers, I observed both how children of different ages react to the same situation and how these reactions can be guided by program staff to promote interesting learning experiences for the children. The five-year-olds were enthralled with the crayfish. Although they found fish scary when they picked them up, they picked them up anyhow -- trusting the adult when she told them that the crayfish would not pinch them if held the proper way. Territorial fights were watched intently, and the children were amazed at how the crayfish crawled out of their hard protective shells (their exo-skeletons, one child told me) because they had outgrown them. From observation, the children learned that crayfish are weak and vulnerable to attack until their new shells harden and that when the appendages (claws) break off they regenerate. The crayfish provided the focus of many discussions -- the survival of the fittest, the meaning of weak and strong, what crayfish ate, how they moved, and so on. In contrast, the ten-year-olds, even though shown how to handle the crayfish, were not willing to take the risk of being pinched. They were attentive to them in other ways. When some of them were "ill" they set up a crayfish hospital and put the sick ones in separate pools, adding grass and rocks for their comfort. They dissected the crayfish and compared their body structure to that of their own body structure and later became involved in reading and studying about other sea creatures. When the crayfish died, the children talked about death -- the death of grandmothers, friends' dogs and cats, as well as the crayfish. Both the five- and ten-year-olds learned a great deal from their experiences with the crayfish. Sylvia Louda, the teacher who shared this activity with me said, "I tell the kids, 'Turn on the TV in your brain, kids. The's where it is . . . see it, hear it, feel it . . . the show will never be over and there will be no commercial interruptions.'"

One can store information, but knowing how to apply one's knowledge is the important thing. I remember being critical of a school where they were teaching ellipsoids in kindergarten and then I went out to the yard at recess and heard two children having an argument; one was saying, "You old ellipsoid head" and I looked and sure enough the kid's head was shaped like an ellipsoid!

Ten-year-olds should have the freedom to choose where they want to go as long as they notify the adult where they are going and when they will return, as long as they check in and out of the home base. They should have the freedom to use any materials or equipment as long as it is

used appropriately and returned to the place it belongs. (Returning it to the right place is often difficult for them!) Rules are a big thing with ten-year-olds. One group, when deciding on what rules to follow when going to the beach, came up with the usual don't shove, don't push, don't throw sand, ask the lifeguard about the waves, remember your towel, don't get lost. But the best one was, "If you're drowning, raise your right hand."

School-age children do not come to a day care program from a vacuum. They are a product of their experiences with people and things in their world. Children are not born with attitudes and prejudices; they learn them. They are not born with an experiential base; they acquire it. They are not born with a value system; they develop it. They are not born knowing how to read, write and do math; they learn how. They are not born generous, considerate, and kind; they learn from their models, explicitly or incidentally, positively or negatively, constructively or destructively, accurately or inaccurately, joyously or gloomily; sometimes they learn the opposite of what we would think. (Judy Cauman* used to tell the story of the little girl who, afraid of the dark, was sent to spend the night with the little girl who was not afraid of the dark. Next morning there were two little girls afraid of the dark.)

Essentially, children's experiences make them certain or unsure of themselves as people, confident or doubtful of themselves in relation to the adults upon whom they are dependent for protection, support and guidance. They are part of a family that has certain beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, expectations and standards for doing things. School-age children in day care programs need adults who recognize that because children's experiences are different the children themselves are different. Adults are needed who respect and listen to the children, who know what activities are appropriate, who challenge their curiosity, who are flexible and inspire confidence, who do not talk down to them, and who are available. In The Sense of Wonder, Rachel Carson wrote, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

In dealing with children a sense of humor is a must. Children's humor is a message conveyor. It helps them explain what they are thinking and how they are feeling. There's a classic story of two children on a field trip. One child says to the other, "Look, there's a rabbit," and the other one says, "No, don't look -- we'll have to draw it!" Young children often know facts in a global way but are not quite accurate. Take, for example, the young child who rushes out from a group of five- and six-year-olds playing house and cries out, "Get a mother quick. . . there's a baby being born in there." School-age children in day care settings like adults who respond to their senses of fantasy and humor with a light touch. One teacher in one of the centers, knowing that she was going to have trouble getting some ten- and eleven-year-olds who were playing a game to come in and eat, donned earphones, grabbed a stick to serve as a

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*Before her death, an author and also a consultant for the Child Welfare League of America and the NANE Board (now known as NAEYC).

microphone and called out, "This is the General speaking. The game is over. Lunch is being served on the patio. Company dismissed. Last call -- on the double!" The kids responded and literally tore in!

Adults can do a great deal to nurture self-discovery and self-discipline in children in day care programs by helping to create an environment where children have the opportunity to try many options, to experiment and stretch their minds, to feel safe to try even though they may not be successful the first time.

Children form close attachments to caring adults. When one of our teachers went on vacation she received a letter which expressed how one child felt about her being away.

Dear Lois,

> How are you. We all miss you very much. We went skating yesterday and all the child care went. Gail pushed Geraldene down and you can guess where she landed. Jeanee isn't crying as much anymore. Candy still sucks her thumb and goes out with her towel. We are having fun dancing but we all fight over the skirts. Beryl goes around with her hair hanging in her face. Kathy got some false fingernails and she looks like a lady with them. Jeanee was crying because she couldn't right a letter. I wish you would come back soon.
>
> Love and kisses, Carla
>
> P.S. Lois, hurry back.

Children do not always see adults as adults think they are being seen. A seven-year-old who has been in children's centers since she was three came in to the teacher and asked her to go outside and settle a fight the girl was having with her friend. The teacher, knowing the children well, told Courtney that she should go back and try to settle it with her friend and that they could be back playing in the time it would take her to come in and out. Courtney said, "The trouble with you is that you've forgotten what it's like to be a child." The teacher said, "I'm sorry," and Courtney replied, "Boy, you just don't understand me. My mother doesn't take 'sorrys' and neither do I."

School-age children in day-care programs need affection which includes trust. They need praise when praise is due, and consistency so they know what is expected. School-age children need time. Too often we hurry them along from activity to activity, giving them little opportunity to savor an experience slowly and thoroughly until it becomes wholly their own. Someone once wrote that it was no use to give children things unless we gave them time to keep them too. Alice Keliher, a leader in the field of early childhood education, asks that we now and again slow down the pace for children, allow them to relax more, and provide time for them to reflect, ponder and dream. If children are going to live to be 100 years old, she asks, why do we have to accomplish everything for them in their first twelve years?

The daily routines of coming and going, mealtimes, snack times, quiet time, and cleanup time make up the basic framework of a child care program. The variety of activities and opportunities for fun and worthwhile experiences offered is limited only by the number of different opportunities in the community and the effectiveness of the staff in finding ways for children to participate.

School-age children need indoor and outdoor space that can be adapted to a variety of uses and they need material and equipment suited to their development. And, above all, school-age children need to be heard!

Children's Voices

I have included the following comments by the children I work with because I think they illustrate many of the points I have made above -- in particular, the point that each child is an individual.

Kitty, age 7. "I don't like it when all I hear is 'Kitty and Renay, you cannot fight at this school. When you're climbing on that jungle gym, Renay and Kitty, you can't push other people down. The swings are gonna break if you keep swinging so high, Renay and Kitty. You may not scream and yell on Renay's birthday.'"

Courtney, age 7. When Courtney's mother told her that she couldn't have a party for her but that she would pick her up early and take her and a friend out to dinner, Courtney said to her teacher, "Now I ask you, is that the best that my mother can do on my birthday?"

Nicki, age 12, to Barbara, the teacher.

N. "The kids always tease me -- they tease me about my pimples."
B. "I've never really noticed."
N. "If you're close, you can really see them."
B. "You know, Nicki, sometimes I still break out with a few pimples during my period."
N. "But Barbara, (very emphatic)...this is my whole face and my hair -- it always looks like this. I brush it, but when I get to school, it looks a mess. I wish it looked like yours. Oh, I forgot to do something, I'll be back." (Nicki does not return.)

A letter from Herbert's teacher: Dear Mrs. C., Herbert has been much better today although there is still room for improvement. He has listened more during group discussions. He is trying very hard to remember to stop talking when the teacher is talking. I know he will show us that he can do even better next week. Sincerely.

P.S. Also please ask him to try to avoid Bobby's influence. He appeared to be imitating behavior!

From Herbert, age 7. Dear Mrs. C., I am quitting school. Herbert

Ann, age 11. "You expect more of me than I want to do. It's not that I can't -- it's just that I don't want to. I'm tired of being bigger than they are. Let them be bigger than I am for once. I'm always bigger and I have no one to be bigger than me."

Jo, age 10, to Pat, the teacher:

J. "I don't like getting sent to sit down."
P. "What do you do so that you have to sit down?"
J. "I get mad and hit people."
P. "Why don't you talk about it instead?"
J. "That's what I'm doing, I'm working on it."

The following are excerpts from group discussions with 8, 9, and 10 year olds.

Q. "What do you like to do?"

A. "Play pool, play pingpong, play baseball, go to the beach, bowl, practice the dance to do for the other kids, make up a play, go on field trips, sell leather things to make money for the Dodger game, science, making models and puppets."

Q. "What would you rather not have in child care?"

A. "Quiet times, sand, mean teachers, bossy teachers, busy work, coloring."

Q. "What don't you like?"

A. "People who hit me."
"When my friends say, 'I don't like you anymore.'"
"I don't like dumb kids or people who fight me or kids who put hands on my back."
"I don't like boys. They're mean--especially David."

Q. "What are your favorite TV shows?"

A. Mork & Mindy
Charlie's Angels
Eight is Enough
Battlestar Galactica

Q. "Who are your favorite movie stars?"

A. Clint Eastwood
Jane Fonda
John Wayne
Clark Gable

Q. "Who is your favorite TV star?"

A. Robin Williams
Pam Drawber
Ricardo Montalban
Kate Jackson

Q. "What is your favorite record?"

A. Heat Wave
Do You Care?

Q. "What kind of people do you like?"

A. "I like people who are nice and respectful."
"I like strict and nice in the middle people."
"I just like good, nice teachers."

Q. "What do you want to be?"

A. "A singer, have a mansion, live by a lake, have three girls and four boys, pick a man right for me, who cares for me and respects me."
"I want to be a rich housewife, a doctor or a singer or a tall model. I don't have to be married. I'm just going to be rich."

Q. "What are you afraid of?"

A. "Junk, PCP, Angel Dust, sharks, rapists, hi-jackers and Jack the Ripper."

Q. "Why are you afraid of them?"

A. "Hi-jackers and Jack the Ripper have guns or knives on them . . . Angel Dust messes up your head. Rapists can force you to make sex."

Q. "How about girls?"

A. "Girls? Well, I say 'no' but if you really want to know . . . 'yes'"

The developmental approach to school-age day care that I have been promoting is not the only approach. There is room for contraries, as Robert Frost so beautifully expressed in "West-Running Brook":

> What does it think it's doing running West
> When all the other country brooks flow East to reach the ocean?
> It must be the brook can trust itself and go by contraries.[3]

We do not have to feel inadequate or anxious or angry or guilty because our efforts as child-care staff are not always 100%, because we cannot always solve existing problems and know what to do. There is a story of a lion who kept asking each animal he met, "Who's the bravest animal in the jungle?" Each animal would answer, "You are, oh mighty lion." Finally he came to an elephant and asked him the same question, whereupon the elephant picked him up, stamped on him and threw him about.

The lion, groggy, shook his head and said, "Just because you didn't know the answer, you didn't need to get so mad about it." I admit that I too don't know all the answers, but I am having fun trying to learn answers as I live and work and learn with the children. I hope you are too.

Footnotes

1. Child Care and Development Services. Report of the Commission to Formulate a State Plan for Child Care and Development Services in California. California State Department of Education, 1978, pp. 4-5.
2. Cohen, Donald J., ed., Serving School Age Children. Washington, D.C.: OCD/DHEW, 1972.
3. In Hall, Donald, The Pleasures of Poetry. Harper & Row, New York, 1971.

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*Documents with ED numbers are available through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) in microfiche and paper copy, unless otherwise noted. (For information on obtaining ERIC documents, in libraries or by mail, see page 104.) Some of these documents are also available from their original source.